

Media Ownership Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking. Docket 06-121.  
Dual Network Ban

In today's highly technological world, people have a lot of choices when it comes to media. Viewers can choose from hundreds of different channels by the mere click of a button any time, any day. Although this may be true, it seems that with big media conglomerations gaining control over smaller networks, more and more of these choices have been stifled.

The current rule of the Dual Network Ban states that common ownership of multiple broadcast networks is permitted but a merger between or among the "top four" networks, *i.e.*, ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC is prohibited. I believe that in order to remain consistent with federal limits on broadcaster's power dating back to the 1930s, this rule should be upheld. This rule should be strictly enforced in order to eliminate the continuance of broadcast dominance on our television screens. The FCC should not weaken the ownership rules because although big media consolidations are good for business, they are not good for the American people. Instead, the FCC should strengthen these rules to make it harder for big media conglomerates to have so much influence over what is being shown on television.

Media consolidation causes more harm than it does help. As a journal review by Russ Maloney states, media consolidation has affected the expression of ideas in society. His review of three different authors, Bagdikian, Einstein, and McChesney, finds that mass media outlets tend to reinforce the status quo and limit the expression of alternative or controversial viewpoints. Bigger media corporations are swallowing up the smaller owned stations so that several markets are left with "competing" stations that are actually owned by the same company.

Maloney's journal review goes on to explain the FCC's current rule of cross-ownership in larger markets in which there are 40 markets where broadcasters own multiple stations. Television station owners are limited to reaching 35% of television households on a national scale but the FCC has considered increasing this limit to 50%! The FCC has already granted waivers to both Fox and Viacom which both have over a 35% reach due to mergers. Not only do these mergers affect the expression of ideas, they affect the diversity of voices. Maloney reports that author Einstein defines three types of diversity—source, outlet, and content. Source diversity has two components—diversity in terms of the actual number of people creating programming and diversity in the types of people who produce that programming. Outlet diversity is about increasing the number of channels through which information is distributed to the public. Content diversity, increasing the variety of programming and points of view, is the ultimate goal. The more stations that are owned by big media corporations such as Viacom or Fox, the less likely viewers will hear different points of view and different types of programming.

According to Bagdikian who is discussed in Maloney's journal review, the number of dominant media corporations has shrunk from 50 to five, and these five corporations decide what most citizens will—or will not—learn. Bagdikian points out that these five companies will be the only ones competing and the large corporations cannot risk losing. The big five indulge in mutual aid and share investments in the same media products therefore creating a lack of competition and an increase in duplicated content. Bagdikian explains that lack of competition makes companies less willing to take chances therefore resulting in fewer program choices for the public and fewer innovative ideas. He also states that the vastness of the large media corporations makes them less motivated to compete. As I stated earlier, when people change to channel to another program, it's very likely that the new program is owned, produced, or distributed by the same company.

Also cited in Maloney's journal review is author McChesney who argues that media consolidations lead to cost-cutting measures and reduced news departments. Large media corporations are afraid to take chances therefore cutting back on risky news reporting in order to go with the safer story. This cut back leads to shoddy news reporting and the stifling of important ideas.

To take a more personal approach, I have always enjoyed watching television, especially the news because I am interested in going into television broadcasting after I graduate college. When I was younger, we only had about five channels to watch but that changed after we switched to Mediacom and we got the regular cable setup. Just because there were more news channels to watch does not mean that they are more diverse or that they do not just support that status quo because in all actuality, they are probably owned by the same company. The possibility of encountering shows that are not owned and operated by the same company is hard to come by. In my public relations class, we learned that the media has what is called an agenda-setting function. This means that the media does not tell us what to think, instead it tells us what to think about. If the FCC allows the large media corporations to merge with each other, the entire American public will be like robots who think the exact same things! There would no longer be a variety of opinions or ideas; we would all be regurgitating what those large corporations want us to. Bagdikian states that the communication cartel of the large corporations has exercised stunning influence over national legislation and government agencies, an influence whose scope and power would have been considered scandalous or illegal twenty years ago. It is the job of the FCC to stop this from happening.

The merging of these large companies also undermines minority ownership. Minority owners are being bought out from larger companies which also contributes to a reduction in diversity. Besides maintaining the dual network ban rule, I think the FCC should try to reduce the percent of households that networks can reach so that minority owners can take back

their stations and help diversify America's television viewing. As an article by R.B. Horwitz states, in a 1973 case called *TV9, Inc. v. FCC*, the court ruled that minority ownership could result in diverse programming. This contributes to the idea that merging causes a decrease in diverse television programming and if the FCC were to allow minorities such as African Americans or women to control some stations, American viewers would be allowed a more diverse television viewing experience.

The battle of media ownership rights has been a controversial issue for many years and it is time to take control of the situation. I believe that in order to have a more diverse television experience that includes the expression of many different ideas, going above and beyond maintaining the status quo, having very competitive stations, and better reporting without cutting corners we must uphold the dual network ban. We cannot allow ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC to dominate television viewing because this kind of deregulation can affect the overall quality of programming. In a dissenting statement by Commissioner Gloria Tristani, she states that despite the lengths to which the majority goes to show viewers benefit from further consolidation in the broadcast industry, the decision will only further erode the already tenuous level of viewpoint diversity available to the public. She goes on to say that no effort was made to describe how the Commission could measure whether these purported benefits reach viewers or advertisers. Decreasing the number of owners of broadcast networks is simply not a means to achieve greater viewpoint diversity. I agree with Tristani that although media consolidations are good for business, they do not benefit the viewers. According to a press statement by Chairman Powell, approximately 84 percent of all Americans subscribe to cable television and I believe it is the FCC's job to give them the best viewing experience possible. Therefore, the FCC should uphold the dual network ban as well as lowering the percentage of homes that can be reached by the major companies in order to provide minorities the opportunity to own stations that will help diversify television.

Erin Nelson  
Augustana College Box 1450  
639 38<sup>th</sup> Street  
Rock Island, IL 61201